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International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work

9-17-2010

Satire as Hacking

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Panel: Satire's Global Reach

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Recommended Citation

Oloixarac, Pola, "Satire as Hacking" (2010). *International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work*. 809.

https://ir.uiowa.edu/iwp_archive/809

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Satire as Hacking

The matter of comedy has deserved very serious treatment throughout the life of books. This of course includes cinema as well, and I'd like to share with you a 20th century definition, by the American comedian Woody Allen.

[\[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kuSaohflsR0\]](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kuSaohflsR0)

The horse, channeling Alan Alda's voice, brings it forth: *If it bends it's funny, if it breaks it isn't*. Woody was hired to depict this grand man, yet by making a comedy out of a comedian, he breaks the pact, and ultimately gets fired. We may suppose Alan Alda was asking for the *bending* quality of representation, to get the kind of self he was looking for. Instead, in Woody's book, the definition reverts: If it *breaks* it's funny, if it bends... well, it just makes Alan Alda happy, and where's the fun in that?

Mutable, ever-changing definitions of funny can vary violently across eras and authors, can twirl against each other and even take themselves as their laughable target. However, the viral power of comedy holds a particular strain, satire, whose almost romantic build-up is closer to timeless epic. For satire is the genre of the little people against the giants (or the place where Giants and little people live together, as in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*). It's also the classical genre for narrating the rebellion of women: Shakespeare's comic heroines and Cervantes' difficult ladies are escaping marriage, are playing with men's minds, and trying to have a life (if not a room) of their own. Satire has also starred in roles as morality's bravest ally, more often than it has befriended libertines. Before society grew accustomed, or trained, in finding aesthetic pleasure in the tale of its own perversities and excesses (that is, before the trend of social realism came to embed the moral *finesse* of the *culturati*), satire was probably the most powerful technology for twisting the arm of the contemporaries. You could only get away with your pungent criticism to society by way of bringing tones of fun. You needed to make them laugh to get your point across. Satire, and her mischievous little sister, Parody, have gone a long way, and have always shaped themselves by following the contours of power –in order to break it. They are experts in finding the vulnerabilities of power and breaking into it, filling the gaps with new meaning. Moreover, as a master satirist may attest, only imminent breakage is proof of worthy writing. Thomas De Quincey considers, in *Murder As One of the Fine Arts*, that “and against Locke's philosophy in particular, I think it an unanswerable objection (if we needed any), that, although he carried his throat about with him in this world for seventy-two years, no man ever condescended to cut it.”

Yet, with all its manifold richness, there is method in its madness. Take a look at a classical Marx brothers bit. A molecule of their humour shows the gap, the cut between worlds. A says give me a break! And B pulls a brake out of his pocket. Comedy shows the gap between language and the world, between ego and its mirrors. It shows that there's nothing natural in what we take for granted, and that the consolidated powers we've grown to consider part of the natural landscape are artificial, and therefore, because their engineered whims are reflections of men, can be bitterly comical. It comes to

Iowa City Public Library and the International Writing Program Panel Series, September 17, 2010:

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show that the norm is made of mistakes, contradictions, discrepancies, power struggles, the ruins of old wars that have become naturalized. And then suddenly *you* are part of the scene, staring at the invisible carrot that had been hanging right between your eyes. By breaking the pact with the status quo, comedy ultimately reveals the political and ideological. But perhaps this is an all-too-romantic definition, a hard one to maintain these days. Because today, the ideological norm is to be happy. Cheerfulness is encouraged, and spiritual darkness frowned upon. Laughter is even part of the medical discourse, and a saturnine character, a sign that something is wrong. Laughter (like sex) is empowering, the sign of a healthy, successful, morally valuable person; sadness is bad for you (and probably causes cancer). Comedy is, therefore, its underlying ideology, the global script with the mandate. The proliferation of comedies of all sorts gives us an idea of a certain soothing quality of comedy that blatantly flatters the hidden rules that we don't question, to help people live with a number of acceptable problems and to provide them with a script of possibilities. Romantic comedies, office comedies, teen comedies, terror comedies, are the hysterical flavors of the American ideological that always need to turn things into a smile, into a "positive" attitude.

At the same time, our times favour the proliferation of a newborn class of humour and communication. Parodies: we see them all over, breaking into previous representations, breaking out into viral swarms: a moving, living form that takes on the electronic lives of online *joie de vivre*. Walter Benjamin (born under the sign of Saturn, as Susan Sontag described him) held that, in the era of massive reproduction, "copy" meant the loss of the aura; that mass-ification of works of art ultimately kills whatever traces of the author lingered in them. Walter Benjamin was, of course, making a critical point about American capitalism, and it's not difficult to see how the battle turned out. Eventually, copy seems to have gained an aura, by way of parody. Every person could repeat, mimic, the former representation, and hence attach his or her own subjectivity to the parodied object. So, OK, the Author with capital letters got lost in copy, but now the parody-maker could turn into an author by the thousands. In a way, it's as if parody has taken a Greek turn. Aristotle defined tragedy as the opposite of comedy, as the ongoing staging of known facts that happens to noble people. So people in Greece went to the theater to see Oedipus, and everybody knew how the story went, everybody knew he was going to turn out blind, yet they would scream to the stage: "Don't go there Oedipus! She's your mom!" only to watch how the dreaded ending inevitably, took place, to the repeated shock and awe of the viewers. And the same happens with the most widely watched genres of our times: pornography and parody. In parody, we see the endless list of people repeating patterns, and taking pleasure at mocking others. In pornography, we see the on and on unfolding of the same events, the infinitely repeated series of imperceptible variations on the same mythical scene, drawn to the limits of exhaustion, until the crucial ending, inevitably crowned by the money shot. Pornography admits no surprises; and parody, no real subjectivity. There might be *juissance*, but no further attempt against the ruling powers.

So, the question I'd like to ask you and myself on the topic of satire's global reach could be: how do we keep comedy a critical endeavor, without losing a sharp edge? Is it possible to be defiant to powers without being an intellectual clown? Or: which is the all encompassing narrative that hasn't been hacked by literature? Is it possible to create "pure" satire, to work directly on the level of syntax, to operate directly on the signs –in order to break them?

In my novel, "The Wild Theories", there's a special attack designed to hack Google Earth. The characters throw a party to launch their attack, and include specific instructions for anyone who wants to partake in the breakage. (So as to avoid legal charges of inciting criminal behavior, I, as an author, am one of the guests to the party: I, the author, didn't *make* the hack). The hack is called DNS cache poisoning, and exploits a pretty interesting vulnerability of the architecture of the internet. There is a

flaw in this architecture that lies, precisely, in ideology. The openness of the internet, or what we call openness, lies in a few computers that later translate the number of other computers into addresses (IP addresses). These few computers centralize information, and can easily track it: there is a chain of command of the authority that gives each computer one name for all to follow. If the web had, say, a different architecture where all the nodes connected with each other, a true peer to peer connection, information would not be hosted somewhere for scrutiny, the packets would just flow horizontally from person to person. There would not be pyramidal powers that oversee the packets, the subjects. If this were this case, Google Earth would remained unhacked by literature, but this is not the case. Vint Cerf, also known as one of the founding fathers of the internet, has said that this vulnerability is one of the things that the founders didn't see coming and that they can't fix. In the literature of hacking, this flaw had been duly noted on an advisory written by EK and Wari in 1997; however, the exploitation of the flaw, that is, the re-writing of the procedure specifically for the maps came ten years later. DNS cache poisoning is about the poisoning of images. In the technological side, it allows the hackers to fill up the landscape screen with all the sentimental/historic/trivial garbage they can think of; ultimately, the representation of chaos and memory in a fluid present hacked the objective, quantified, all-encompassing narrative of Google.

Our interactions are based on this architecture marked by ideology, which only becomes visible once you break it, once you show the gap. It was ideological matter I was hacking into. Operating on signs, breaking their syntax and meaning, the mutation of literature into informatic code, literally executed by the end of the book, remained political. To poison the tissue of constructed reality had mighty predecessors: the imps, the little creatures of Saxon folk that enjoyed creating chaos in the world of men, and that live on in the root of impish, and in the rootkit of power hacks and every code that revives the ancient promise of language: to utter words, that later happen and become real. In the strain of epic satire, it wasn't merely a way to tag an EPIC FAIL to the biggest giant; it was about words and their meaning, and what ultimately makes writing.